

The Story of Tabara*

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People of Padugere were talking of Tabara Setty's deranged state of mind. In fact, of the many lunatics in Padugere, Tabara Setty was the twenty fifth one.

If anybody went crazy in Padugere, nobody would be alarmed because he didn't go crazy overnight; in fact it happened gradually. People, who expected someone to lose his mind any day, showed some lip sympathy once he went mad. They had accepted lunatics as inevitable entities of their society. Thus, these lunatics had some kind of history behind their condition.

Tabara Setty was indeed a well-known personality of that small town. He had joined the Government service during the British administration of India. Of the only two individuals of Padugere who openly admired the British administration for its sense of discipline and justice, if Doctor Sylva was one, the other was Tabara Setty. Hence, while sharing their old memories with others, both of them were quoting each other to prove whether what they spoke was true or not.

During the British administration, when Tabara took charge of a check-post as a tax collector, he was indeed a very proud man. People treated him with great respect. Vegetable and fish vendors, who regularly came to Padugere for selling their goods, would give him some of their stocks along with tax.

Then, one day, the entire nation was gripped with some kind of agitation. It was the Indian struggle for Independence. Even before the heat of the World war had subsided, the struggle began generating much disturbance in the country. Exactly during that time, Tabara Setty had married a girl called Appi or Appamma who hailed

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from the coastal region of Mangalore. Sometimes, sitting leisurely by the check-post, both of them would speak of the freedom movement. Though they had frequently heard of someone called Gandhi who was fighting against the British, both of them did not know any particular reasons behind the fight between Gandhi and the British. However, they knew one thing: the agitation aimed at throwing the British out of India. Tabara was not really a 'patriot' in that sense of the term. But he would wonder sometimes why these white people lived like grotesque creatures amidst blacks, when they could've chosen to live among their fellow white beings in their own country. Sometimes, though vaguely, he could discern some truth and rationality in Gandhi's arguments. Things became bumpy for Tabara, when the agitation took violent turns such as the angry mob refusing to pay tax, burning the government property, etc. Now, he couldn't have maintained his poise by merely expressing his difference of opinion; he had to take sides and work for it. He couldn't have kept quiet when people refused to pay tax. Tabara was indeed, greatly alarmed and began cursing Gandhi for all the tumult he had created in the nation. In order to avoid further troubles, he begged for a transfer and was somehow successful in getting the job of a caretaker in the Circuit House of Padugere. Thanks to his new job, which entailed serving the British from close quarters, Tabara realized that despite their strange appearance, the whites too were human beings, like him and his people.

In the meanwhile, agitation was steadily increasing. There was also this news about the youth of influential and affluent families leaving their homes to join their hands with Gandhi in his war against the British. In the face of the struggle for Independence, there were Lathi charges, golibaris, agitations and non-cooperation movements. However, Tabara had no clear standing in all these tricky affairs. When he would hear that people had ransacked telephone connections, he was angry with Gandhi. And, when he heard that the police were shooting people mercilessly, he was angry with the British.

Gradually, the agitation intensified and its impact was felt both in villages and Taluk headquarters. Now, there were some stirrings within Tabara that prevented him from serving the British wholeheartedly. Added to this, when the White officers came to stay in the Circuit House, they were accompanied by Anglo-Indian butlers who would look down on Tabara and treat him with contempt and suspicion. Such treatment irritated Tabara to a very great extent. It was then that Appi advised him to seek a posting in the Taluk Office.

By the time Tabara joined the Taluk Office as a peon, India had got its Freedom. Gradually the red faces of the whites had begun dwindling. Fellow Indians were, in fact ruling India. And in Padugere, along with the Taluk Office, other buildings such as the Taluk Development Board, the Coffee Board and many such things began cropping up.

When Tabara joined the Taluk Office, there was a serious discussion over issues such as to what department Tabara basically belonged, what designation should be given to be him now and with what remuneration. The case was referred to a department and from there to another department and thus it shuttled from one department to another; finally, it was decided that he basically belonged to the municipality of Padugere. By the time this issue was settled and the appropriate uniform was given to Tabara, many years had elapsed and he had reached the age of retirement. However, during all these years there were no signs of imminent madness in Tabara's life, despite the many pressures and tensions he endured as part of his work.

During the last days of his career, Tabara was assigned the job of collecting tax from the coffee depots.

Twenty five years had elapsed since India had attained Independence. Now Gandhi was a mere memory. On the day Tabara reported to duty and went to collect tax, the depot manager of the Coffee Board took up an issue with the Municipality and demanded tax exemption for the coffee powder that was meant for export. This resulted in a serious litigation between the Depot Manager and the Municipality.

In the meanwhile, Ramanna – a retail Coffee merchant of Padugere, objected that he paid tax in the Depot while buying and also while selling it outside. Taking up the cue, the coffee farmers refused to pay tax. Tabara was totally at a loss. Though Gandhi had died, his agitation seemed to have continued. Tabara, in the meanwhile, had issued tax receipts in advance to a couple of coffee farmers who now refused to pay him money.

“If you couldn’t collect the tax, why did you issue receipts? Now, pay it from your own salary,” admonished the President of the Municipality and imposed a penalty on Tabara. From his sixty rupees a month salary, he had to compensate for the receipts he had issued worth nearly three hundred sixty rupees. Tabara began cursing himself for courting the trouble on him.

When Tabara was approaching retirement, for some reasons Appi’s health began deteriorating and she began losing weight at an alarming pace. “What else can she do but crib? She is cribbing because we have no children. What to do, God did not give us any children; may be it is not written on our foreheads. More than that, He did not also give me enough time to produce children,” Tabara confessed to his neighbours.

Someone suggested to Tabara that Appi’s declining health could be due to some evil-drug that somebody who did not like Appi might have administered to her. So, Tabara checked her up thoroughly by rubbing drumstick juice to her palms, by soaking a tamarind seed in her urine, etc. In spite of all such check-ups, nothing was discovered. Finally, he gave all the money he had to Jubeda Beebi, who was known to remove evil-drugs, to get some medicine for Appi.

Jubeda gave Appi something for diarrhea and vomiting, showed something Appi had thrown out as evil-drug, and gave some herbal medicine for Appi to chew. But, none of it could cure Appi’s weakness.

When Tabara was experimenting to detect Appi’s disease, he had noticed that phalanx of ants gathered around Appi’s urine. He suspected now that her problem might have been related to some defect in her urine.

Tabara took Appi to Doctor Sylva for medical check-up. After performing several tests on her, the doctor's initial doubts that it might be diabetes got confirmed. "How is it that your wife is inflicted by this disease, Tabara?! It only visits the affluent. During my service, only a couple of *ferangi* sahibs were affected by this. May be it's in your stars to become rich now", patting Tabara jovially, Sylva prescribed some tablets and also warned that if it aggravated she needed some injections. "Look here, you have got the disease that generally visits kings and queens. Though not their status, you got at least their disease", Tabara joked with his wife.

"Let alone getting money due to the stars of this disease, even the little that was saved has gone now and it has almost come to begging," Tabara wondered later. Meanwhile, the Padugere Municipality was dissolved as it had completed its term and it was the responsibility of the Tahsildar to call for fresh elections.

One day, Tabara received a notice from the Taluk Office which stated that he had not paid the money for a couple of receipts and if he failed to pay it immediately the money would be deducted from his salary. Tabara went to the Tahsildar and confessed what had happened and pleaded his innocence. After listening to Tabara for a while, the Tahsildar said that he could change the existing record that stated that Tabara misused the money and write instead it was the money that Tabara had to collect from tax payers. Tabara had no other option but to pay nearly three hundred and sixty rupees from his own purse.

For the first time in his life, Tabara went down with shame and dejection. He narrated to the Tahsildar how he had worked under all the eminent white Sahibs who never alleged such charges on the working people and ended up his plea by flattering the white sahibs for their efficiency and justice. "You can verify it from Doctor Sylva whether what I say is true or false," said Tabara.

The Tahsildar did not really care for such old tales of hags like Tabara. His senses were all devoured completely by register columns, applications, signatures, notices and litigations. Who would care for an old man's woes and memories that went beyond the

columns of all applications? By complementing the British administration, Tabara had inadvertently criticized the present native administration.

Though nobody knew what the Tahsildar did, Tabara's salary was withheld. Tabara did not even have any money to get medicine for Appi. By begging somebody, he somehow managed to get her two meals a day.

Someone suggested that he should try for pension. Tabara immediately rushed to the Tahsildar with a request for pension. "Well, submit your application and I will forward it to the higher authorities," the Tahsildar said and buried his nose in the files.

As the dates of Municipal elections were nearing, a candidate called Bantappa approached Tabara and said, "How can they refuse you pension? Come, let's file a case against the government." Tabara had apparently given him an opportunity for social service.

When Tabara met the Tahsildar along with Bantappa, the Tahsildar replied, "It is not clear whether Tabara is covered under Provident Fund Scheme or Pension scheme. I am corresponding with the higher authorities in this matter."

After a rough calculation, Bantappa told Tabara that if he was covered under the Provident Fund Scheme, he would get around six to seven thousand rupees. Tabara was really elated. He thought that his wife's disease must be a royal one as it showed signs of bringing him a fortune. A ray of hope began flickering in him.

Quoting his forthcoming pension money, he raised small loans here and there and began waiting at the doorsteps of the Taluk Office. In the mean time, Appi, while doing household chores, stumbled on something and got her toe injured. Tabara was cheerful on that day because a clerk had informed him that there was a response from the higher authorities and Tabara would get about seventeen thousand rupees as his Provident Fund money. Happily dreaming over what he had heard, Tabara told his wife, "Sylva doctor tells me that there is some powerful injection and it can vanish your disease in a wink," saying this he began happily mulling over the money and his wife.

When beaming Tabara met the Tahsildar the next day, he was asked to get service certificates from all the departments he had served earlier. Without realizing the great troubles that awaited him, Tabara felt happy thinking of the seventeen thousand rupees. "Sir, please give me the certificate. My wife needs treatment," Tabara went around unfolding his woes from one office to another. And, gradually his file began "building up".

Appi's toe-injury deteriorated seriously and it blocked all her movements. When she was taken to a Government hospital, the doctors said it was gangrene and her toe needed to be amputated. Shocked, Tabara thought, "Damn these doctors, they talk of removing a leg just for a minor injury, let me take her to a local Pundit."

Tabara's file was almost complete by now and the Tahsildar had told him that it had been now sent to the higher office for approval. When Tabara went to the Taluk office next day to enquire the status of his pension money, the Tahsildar became furious: "Do you think the file has been sent to your backyard so that it would return in a day? Mind you, it has to reach Bangalore and from there it will return."

Bantappa was there to assure Tabara. "Don't worry, come let's go to Bangalore. I will bear all your expenses; you don't need to give me anything. In return, if you just ensure the votes of your colony, that is enough." On second thoughts, they decided they should first go to Chikmagalore – the district headquarters, to find out the status of his file before going to Bangalore, the state head quarters.

They went to Chikmagalore Deputy Commissioner's office and made enquiries. "Why did you come here? Everything should come through the proper channel," the section clerk shouted. "Get out of here." The peon shooed them away.

When they were about to leave the office, the section superintendent sent a peon to call Tabara alone and warned Tabara that he shouldn't be seen with a politician such as Bantappa. Patting Tabara affectionately, he said since the silver jubilee function of the Independence was around the corner, the file might move slowly and he should not worry about it.

When Tabara returned home, his wife was wailing and asked him to give her poison so that she would not have to endure any pain. "My file is sent up now, I might get money anytime. Don't worry, I will take you to Bangalore and whatever might be the cost, I will get you good medicine," he tried consoling her.

The next day, when he took her to the government hospital, the doctors said that she should be immediately taken to an advanced hospital in Sakaleshpur where she would be amputated till her knee; otherwise her chances of survival were bleak.

Confounded, Tabara was returning home, when the Taluk Office peon came and asked him to meet the Tahsildar as his file had come back.

A bleak hope of saving Appi made Tabara go the Tahsildar. A clerk in the District office had sent back the file saying that he now required certificates from the Shanubhog and Patel of the village stating that "Tabara is a resident of our village" to process the file further.

At home, unable to bear the pain, Tabara's wife was screaming, "Don't give me medicine or anything, go and get me a quarter rupee of rat poison." The cruel irony was that, on that day, Tabara did not even have a quarter of a rupee!

Tabara was recalling the good old British days. "Psch, how nice it was during the days of kings. If they liked, they would grant even farmland on the spur of the moment. How liberal were those people! If they were pleased, they would give revenues and rewards! Compared to the current administration of his own people, he really felt that the bygone days were far better and splendid. "Bloody bastards, these people want to rule the state; they neither know how to give nor to take. Want records and certificates for everything," he began jeering the swadeshi administration.

His file was moving back and forth. Many days elapsed in the meanwhile. Gradually along with his hope for getting the due money, Tabara also began losing hope of saving his wife.

After some days, Tabara was summoned to the Tahsildar's office. When he went there, his throat was choked and his face looked as if it was trapped in the web of eternal misery.

"They have asked for a police report on you. I heard that you went with that Naxal Bari Communist Bantappa and created a scene in the District office", as soon as Tabara stepped into the office, the Tahsildar began scolding him. "But, what to do, even I feel pity when I see your plight. Even though God has given you all this suffering, you don't seem to have picked up any wisdom. Anyhow, I will send a favourable report about you. And, tell me how much would you contribute for the silver jubilee celebration of the Independence Day?" A strange smile flowered on Tabara's face and he said, "Sir, please write down my entire pension money as contribution." The Tahsildar could spot some strangeness in Tabara's behavior.

Tabara slowly began realizing the operation of a brutal, meaningless web that went on transforming human beings into police, office, Shanubhog-Patel, peon and other such rigid forms by fostering some scratched files as their conscience. He could see the Satan's trap that went on consuming human beings and humanity, and spitting them out after having thoroughly chewed them up. In this scheme, the Tahsildar seemed like a devil that killed people, dried them like fish and kept them neatly in files.

By looking at this factory of hell, tears began rolling down Tabara's eyes. For his sake, for the sake of his wife, and also for the sake of the Tahsildar who all looked alike, he could not check his emotions any longer; he began crying loudly.

A few days later, when Tabara somehow managed to take his wife to the Sakaleshpur government hospital, he was asked to get a certificate stating that he was a retired government employee, and also a clarification letter as to whether a Municipality worker could be considered as a government employee.

When miserable Tabara was haplessly coming back, his wife, who couldn't bear humanly intolerably pain, fainted on the street. Tabara went to the butcher's shop nearby and asked Yusuf - the butcher, "Will you cut my wife's leg up to the knee

joints?" The heads that were severed off from a couple of sheep, in a ghastly manner, were blankly staring at the sky. "Do you wish to prepare sambar out of your wife's severed leg?" Yusuf guffawed. Those sitting next to him also began laughing at Tabara.

A suspicion sprouted in Tabara and he thought he must have died long ago and was now roaming in the world of dead souls.

It is said that Tabara was laughing when his wife died. People of Padugere were also eagerly waiting to declare him mad because only then they could relegate his problems to a different world and get away with a clean conscience.

When they came across Tabara, only a few could discern the atrocious face of our system; at such times, they were gripped with an unknown fear. It was only a coincidence that Tabara went mad when the nation was celebrating the silver jubilee of its Independence Day. It is said that when everybody was praising freedom and lecturing on its importance at length, Tabara was praising the British administration. Everybody was laughing at his madness.

The only person who was really worried when he heard of Tabara's madness was the Tahsildar. Three hundred rupees was due from the receipts that Tabara had issued. After obtaining Tabara's signature, the Tahsildar had thought of deducting it from his Provident Fund money. He had in fact sent a report stating that Tabara was in good health and the money due from him was not a result of his misuse but was a result of some changes in the administrative policies.

Finally, when the Tahsildar came to know that Tabara had gone mad, what remained to be seen was whether he could retain his own sanity.

